

# German government to establish Eastern Europe Institute

Sven Heymanns  
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The German government plans to open an academic institute that will be tasked with researching the region of the former Soviet Union. This plan is integral to the aggressive reorientation of German foreign policy and its geostrategic aims in eastern Europe.

The goal of the institute is to analyse developments in the post-Soviet areas and advise decision makers, according to an account in the *Tagesspiegel*. Its purpose will not be pure research, but “application-oriented knowledge”—a thinly veiled reference to the real intended purpose of the institute, which will serve as a think tank for an aggressive German foreign policy in eastern Europe.

According to the *Tagesspiegel*, the founding of the institute was explained by the fact that there is “barely any research relevant to the present day.” At the end of the Cold War, numerous eastern Europe research institutions were closed and professorships were left unoccupied. In the political and social sciences in Germany, there was a lack of qualified experts.

The Foreign Office will provide more than €5 million by 2017 for the building of the institute, according to information released at the end of January. This year, €500,000 will flow into the project, followed by €2.5 million in both of the next two years.

The Foreign Office explicitly told the news agency Reuters that the founding of the institute was an immediate reaction to the crisis in Ukraine. “Strengthening our understanding of Eastern Europe has been a top priority of the foreign minister. This is all the more important given the paradigm shift in our relations with Russia since the annexation of Crimea,” a source close to Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said.

The founding of the institute is an expression of a new strategic orientation of the German government. Several months before the coup in Kiev and the Russian annexation of Crimea, the government coalition of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) indicated that the strengthening of academic research on eastern Europe was

one of its goals. In the coalition contract, the coalition partners say they want “to place competence on Russia and Eastern Europe on a solid foundation in Germany. To this end, we want to strengthen academic analysis and expertise about this region.”

The 2013 strategy paper “New power, new responsibility”, of the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP, German Institute for International and Security Affairs), also emphasises the necessity for academic research in the service of German militarism. “A more complex environment with shortened response times also requires better cognitive skills, knowledge,” it says. “Knowledge, perception, understanding, judgment and strategic foresight: all these skills can be taught and trained.”

To this end, concrete investments “on the part of the state, but also the universities, research institutions, foundations and foreign policy institutions”, are necessary. “The goal must be to establish an intellectual environment that not only enables and nurtures political creativity, but is also able to develop policy options quickly and in formats that can be operationalised,” the paper said.

The founding of the new Eastern Europe Institute is a significant step to this end. The Foreign Office had already increased its investment in foreign policy think tanks, including the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) and the SWP.

Another condition further clarifies the goal of the German government in founding the Eastern Europe Institute. The Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) are explicitly excluded as objects of research at the institute. These countries have “already carried out the transformation of their societies into Western democracies to such an extent that they have to be seen in a different context”, the paper notes. The governments of these countries, all of which have become members of the European Union (EU) and NATO, are particularly aggressive toward Russia.

After reintroducing capitalism in eastern Europe and expanding NATO and the EU to the borders of Russia in the past 25 years, the German bourgeoisie now wants to bring

the remaining eastern European countries of the former Soviet Union under its domination. Their behaviour in Ukraine in the past year has shown that they will not shrink from open cooperation with fascists and openly supporting a putsch against an elected president.

They now want to turn this into a permanent policy on a professional basis. It is significant that the founding of the institute was initiated by the German Society for Eastern European Studies. Its president, Ruprecht Polenz (CDU), was a representative in parliament and president of the parliamentary committee on foreign affairs from 2005 to 2013.

The German Society for the Study of Russia *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Osteuropakunde*, DGO), founded in 1913, was already closely connected with the Foreign Office at that time. Like numerous other institutes that were founded in reaction to the German defeat in the First World War and the treaty at Versailles, it served as a political advisory institution under the Weimar Republic and the National Socialists.

German “eastern research” was considered “study of the enemy” at that time and was aimed above all at fashioning a pseudo-academic foundation for revanchist territorial claims in Poland and Czechoslovakia. Numerous historians, sociologists, geographers, ethnologists, linguists and other academics were already working in the 1920s on laying the foundations for the future expansion of Germany. Institutes such as the Foundation for German People and Agriculture Research, which was founded in Leipzig in 1920, and the Institute for Border and Foreign Studies, which has worked in Berlin since 1925, played an important role in this effort.

In the course of the Second World War, numerous institutes and academics performed the ideological work involved in planning and carrying out National Socialist crimes all over Europe. The so-called Operation Ritterbusch, named after the Kiel legal expert Paul Ritterbusch—and also known as the “military deployment of the humanities”—is particularly significant. At their own initiative, approximately 500 academics from different disciplines took part in the German campaigns of conquest, particularly those in eastern Europe. The refurbishing of this operation began once again in the late 1990s and has still not been completed.

The only criticism of the most recent project of the Foreign Office to be heard from the universities comes from the right. Several professors who are themselves researchers in the area of eastern Europe demanded that the government invest in existing institutes and integrate them into German foreign policy in this way.

Susanne Schattenberg, director of the Eastern Europe Research Department at the University of Bremen,

complained that the existing institutions are “not being expanded and given increased funding.” Furthermore, she told the *Tagesspiegel*, when there is a failure to invest in the universities, there is a failure to cultivate the next generation of researchers, asking, “Where are the Eastern Europe experts supposed to come from, if they are not being educated?”

Klaus Segbers, chair for Eastern European Studies at the Free University in Berlin, argues in this way. There is no incentive for young students to specialise in regional studies today, he complains. There is a lack of demand on the job market and there is only short-term work available at the universities. Segber’s plea implies young academics will be offered the best career chances to the extent that they orient their future careers to Germany’s return to aggressive great power politics.

However, it is not as though there has not been any cooperation between universities and the government and military up until now. The universities in Berlin in particular are known for their connections in the highest ruling circles and in the military.

The name of the Eastern Europe Institute remains undecided. As the *Wirtschaftswoche* reports, the government does not want to create the impression “that we are thinking of Russia within Soviet parameters.” The goal is to find a construct in which academic independence is protected in spite of state financing. This is especially important in times “in which the Kremlin is pouring money into a propaganda and information war with the West and building a state controlled foreign media.”

The Foreign Office finds itself in the embarrassing position of trying to obscure the true character of the new Eastern Europe Institute, an institution that is tasked with preparing and legitimising the drive of German imperialism to expand to the east the same way it did in the twentieth century.



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